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BOOKS

A modern heart

The dilemma of Albert Camus was to tell the just truth fairly

ALBERT CAMUS
A Biography
By Herbert R. Lottman
Doubleday, 753pp, $16.95

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
Special to The Gazette

Twenty years after his accidental death at the age of 49, Albert Camus remains an enigma. The writer who introduced the existential anti-hero in *L'Etranger* (The Stranger), and who devoted his own existence to battling totalitarianism in all its guises, lived much of his life in a shroud of tortured moral decisions and gnawing limitations.

As Herbert Lottman's abundant biography reveals, Camus' successes were tempered by incongruities. It was painful for him to accept the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957; he was mired in a prolonged writer's block, during which his "complete work" was for several years sacrificed while he issued one public or private letter after another on the controversial issues of Algerian independence and his own freedom.

Associates recall the young Camus, directing theatre and leftist ideology in Algiers, as imbued with "natural authority."

He was a man of action — he was pleased when people said he dressed and looked like Humphrey Bogart — yet he was plagued by recurring bouts with tuberculosis.

He had a high profile in everything he tackled — from resistance journalism to theatre to philosophy — yet his illness and inner moral debates confined him to numerous solitary periods in which he could only scribble fragmented *pensées* in schoolboy notebooks.

Above all, Camus' personal and public battles kept him away from his strongest attachment — the spirit of Mediterranean man. Lottman writes:

> The conceit of Mediterranean man (and of his allies) is that these sun-blessed shores breed men who know their limits and the just measure of things. If for the Northern European the voluble, easily excitable Mediterranean seems anything but evenhanded and serene . . . the literate Mediterranean is imbued with the certainty that he has inherited from the classics, has been tamed along with nature.

It was this spirit that made Camus such a galvanizing force, but it also inspired envy among his Parisian contemporaries.

Paris consumed him, in his role on the resistence newspaper *Combat* and later as the thinker much of his generation looked to for moral guidance. At the height of terrorist activity in Algeria, Camus "attempted a definition of art, based on reality and revolt against reality":

> It was neither refusal nor total consent, and in consequence it represented a heartbreak perpetually renewed. The point was neither to flee reality nor to submit to it, but to know precisely how much reality to bestow on a work so that it did not disappear into vapidity. For over a period of a century and a half writers had been able to live in happy irresponsibility, but this was no longer possible: we must know that we cannot escape the common misery, and our only justification as artists is to speak for those who cannot. The free artist is not a man of comfort nor of interior disorder but of imposed order. Camus' plea was for freedom of the artist: art is the enemy of all oppressions, artists and intellectuals were the first victims of modern tyrannies of right and left, and when modern tyranny sees the artist as a public enemy, it is justified in its fears.

Albert Camus was pleased if you said he resembled Bogart

"Camus' personal and public battles kept him away from his strong attachment to the spirit of Mediterranean man"

Camus' fall is echoed in the autobiographical character who dumps himself on a dark street in Copenhagen for a long confession in *La Chute* (The Fall). Camus wrote: "He has a modern heart, which means that he can't stand being judged. Thus he hastens to try himself but he does it so as better to judge others."

Camus' position on the Algerian struggle for independence during the 1950s was a painful one. He supported Algerian autonomy but felt it should include native Frenchmen and Moslems alike. He deplored colonialism but could not justify the terrorism that had led to the death of his mother in a crowded marketplace. Asked by many to take a stand, Camus fought hard to remain silent.

By this time Camus had been hurt, to the point of tears, by the denunciations of his former friend Jean-Paul Sartre and his followers who had avowed communism during the last Stalinist purges. Now they attacked his collection of philosophical essays, *L'Homme Revolté* (The Rebel), which attempted to "tell the truth without being generous."

The jealousies of the Parisian literary scene — painstakingly put into perspective by Lottman — took their toll on Camus during the final decade of his life. He was accused of being *too* attractive, as if his fine style masked facile motives.

Then came the Nobel prize, and the stoic Camus was forced to withstand the pressures and follies of being a literary superstar. During the last couple of years he seemed at last to find some equilibrium and was working seriously on what he aimed to be his consummate work — *Le Premier Homme*, a story spanning the century — when a faulty axle on his beloved sportscar (of a make later recalled from the market) caused his death.

How he would have dealt with the countercultures and third world insurgencies of the past two decades is a matter of conjecture, but, as the fierce struggle for independence that threads through Lottman's chronicleindicates, we are the poorer for not being able to reap the fruits of what would have been Camus' most mature years.

• Juan Rodriguez is a Montreal writer.

Read and write

Fuming? Pleased? Then you're urged to write to You Be the Critic, a regular feature in your Friday *Gazette*.

The Vital garden path of tact needs weeding

DEAREST ANDREW
Letters from
V. Sackville-West
To Andrew Reiber, 1951-1962
Edited by Nancy MacKnight
John Wiley & Sons, 127pp, $11.95

By MARION McCORMICK
Special to The Gazette

In March, 1951, a man named Andrew Reiber, living in a coastal village in Maine, wrote to Vita Sackville-West at Sissinghurst Castle, Kent. He introduced himself as a longtime admirer of her novels and verse and asked if the schoolboy son of a friend might visit her famous garden. She answered that she would be pleased to show the boy around, and thus this newly published correspondence began.

It went on for 11 years (Vita died in 1962), but it wasn't brisk and it wasn't voluminous. This slim volume contains about 50 letters and would be a good deal slimmer without the addition of related extra material — a radio script Vita wrote on her personal beliefs, a poem of hers on the Coronation of Elizabeth II, some excerpts from the journal kept by her husband, Sir Harold Nicolson, the MP and posthumously famous diarist — and extensive connecting passages by the editor, Nancy MacKnight, a professor at the University of Maine. Only Vita's letters survive, lovingly preserved by Andrew.

In the foreword Professor MacKnight says, "On occasion she (Vita) writes to her unknown 'dearest Andrew' about 'surprisingly intimate things.'" The editor's idea of intimacy is not mine. Most of the letters are hardly more than politely perfunctory, like the duty letters youngsters are made to write to generous aunts and grannies after Christmas.

They even follow the same pattern: first, the excuses for having taken so long to write, then the acknowledgement of the gift and a word about what plans the professedly delighted recipient has for it, a weather report, and goodbye.

An excerpt from what is called a typical letter appears on the back flap of the book jacket, and the letter is worth quoting because it is really not typical, being longer than the others and also giving a more generous glimpse of Vita's daily life. On February 17, 1955 she wrote:

> My dear Andrew
> So long since I have written to you! I got your precious Valentine of zinnias on just the right day. Can't plant them yet: too cold. I am saving them up till April. And then I got the glass-flower leaflet — all from you and your kind thought of me constantly — and the Pine-pillow which is my joy every night. I put it behind my head and read my book, and delicious wafts of pine-scent come to me each time I move, and I think "Dear unknown Andrew!"

The excerpt on the jacket ends there, but Vita goes on:

> Really that little pine-pillow is quite the nicest thing I ever had. It's a true treasure, and I hope its scent never fades.
> I lead such a funny mixed life. Shall I give you a cross-section of it? This morning I sat on the Bench — do you know what that is? It means I am a Magistrate, or what we call a Justice of the Peace — and I have to be all tidy in a coat-and-skirt and a hat — and have to administer justice to my fellow countrymen. Then I come home and change into my old gardening clothes, which means breeches and high boots, and I go and tramp about in mud and snow. Then as dusk falls I come in, and write the book I am trying to write — and then I really feel *myself* — in my tower shut away. I become an author again, and am happy. But that is not the whole story. Another side of my life suddenly barges in. The telephone rings. Will I lunch with the Queen tomorrow, to meet the Shah of Persia?
> Well, one can't refuse. It amounts to a Royal Command. Besides, it will amuse me, much as I hate going to London.
> So there you are, Andrew, you see what a curiously mixed life I lead, and what a queer person you have got yourself attached to.

Good enough as far as it goes, but even Professor MacKnight recognizes that this is not far enough. She provides the information which explains why the Nicolsons were invited to the Queen's party: Sir Harold had been born in Teheran, had served in the British Embassy there, and Vita had written two travel books on the country.

"The editor's idea of intimacy is not mine"

Details of the party are taken from Harold Nicolson's journal, in which he noted that the Winston Churchills were among the guests and that Vita had been placed next to Winston, "who is in his best mood and talks to her gaily about history."

She mentioned none of this to Andrew, which indicates how meagre a slice of her life Vita was willing to share with him, perhaps with anyone.

In a letter to her husband in 1945, Vita wrote: "Quite a lot of people have been to see the garden, which always pleases me. How much I prefer strangers to my friends."

Of course. Friends will not be palmed off with a tour of the garden, except for a worshipful pen friend, a safe three thousand miles away, who was wise enough never to visit. (Not that he was ever invited.)

Vita Sackville-West may have had other such correspondents, and it's depressing to think that more collections like this one may even now be on the way to the printer.

• Marion McCormick is a Montreal writer.

China's book famine may ease

PEKING — (UPI) — China indicated earlier this month that its great book famine may shortly be over with a new, if strictly controlled, literary renaissance underway.

Millions of books, including some of China's greatest collections, were destroyed in political upheavals such as the Cultural Revolution, but publishers at a recent national meeting said this book famine had "greatly eased," the official Xinhua News agency reported.

One of China's leading propagandists, Wang Renzhong, head of the Communist Party's Central Committee, heralded a possible literary renaissance when he borrowed one of Mao Tse-Tung's most famous quotes and told the publishers, "Let a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend."

Publishers should "continue to liberate their thinking . . . and improve the quality of their work," he said.

But any new flowering of literature in China would be carefully controlled.

It is well known that "politically risky" Western literature has circulated clandestinely among translators and privileged officials here.

"Future emphasis will be on books helping to raise people's political consciousness, their scientific and cultural level," Xinhua said, and would also "cultivate communist morality."

Now that there are no gentlemen Hobson attacks the cant of the '70s

OVER AND ABOVE
By Laura Z. Hobson
Doubleday, 258pp, $11.50

By MARCY KAHAN
Special to The Gazette

Laura Z. Hobson first won acclaim for her novel about anti-semitism in postwar America, *Gentleman's Agreement*.

Her story of a New York reporter posing as a Jew revealed that anti-semitic attitudes were both pervasive and unconscious, even among otherwise enlightened liberals. The book prompted many Americans to examine their consciences about how they treated racial and religious minorities, and the movie version, directed by Elia Kazan and starring Gregory Peck, won the Academy Award for Best Picture of 1947.

Over and Above, Hobson's most recent novel, is also about the nature of prejudice. But it is much less self-searching and considerably more pretentious.

This is a resolutely trendy novel about a handful of contemporary New Yorkers preoccupied with resolutely trendy issues: Arab terrorism; the failure of old-fashioned liberalism; the necessity for women's liberation; the complexity of guilt-ridden mother-daughter relationships.

The story spans the American Bicentennial year — 1976 — chronicling the crises affecting three upper-middle-class women.

Amy Light is a 45-year-old writer of children's books. Her conventional marriage has disintegrated because her husband, Vincent, has become intolerably jealous of her flourishing career. Although she has ignored the rituals and tenets of Judaism all her life, Amy is increasingly disturbed by the proliferation of Arab terrorism in the mid-'70s.

Meanwhile, Amy's only daughter, Julie, has dropped out of college, ended an affair with a passionate Zionist named Eph Steiner, and begun a new affair with a wealthy Jewish supporter of the P.L.O. named Danny Gelb.

At the same time, Amy's 75-year-old mother, the famous painter Eugenie Maxe, is undergoing an eye operation for the removal of a cataract.

All ends happily, since *Over and Above* is not so much a novel as a sociological fairy tale.

Amy conveniently acquires a supportive lover, a discreet psychoanalyst named Seth Abrams. While celebrating the success of the Israeli commando raid on Entebbe Airport — an event which ends the book — Amy realizes that despite years of agnosticism, she is proud of her Jewishness.

She also learns that it is perfectly legitimate to hate one's own daughter, especially if the daughter is openly hostile, rabidly anti-semitic, and enthusiastically condones terrorism.

Eugenie Maxe recovers from surgery with her eyesight improved. The book's most poignant passages detail her rediscovery of the visual world.

Julie finally realizes that Danny Gelb is a violent maniac. She renounces her extremist politics, becomes reconciled with her mother, and goes back to college.

The salient quality of this novel is its complete lack of humor and exuberance. Though written in the third person, its tone belongs to Amy: grim, outraged, self-obsessed.

Much of the writing rings false because its central confrontation is a fake. Middle-class decency can never be reconciled with terrorism as easily and glibly as Julie returns to her mother.

Over and Above is chiefly interesting because it illustrates how insecure and self-destructive American society has become since the days of *Gentleman's Agreement*.

The earlier book focused on its male characters, presenting them as heroes who patronized women as a matter of course.

In *Over and Above*, the male characters are either unattractive chauvinists (Amy's ex-husband, Vincent; Danny Gelb) or sensitive ciphers (Eph Steiner; Seth Abrams). Even Amy's dead father is portrayed as a shameful figure, who betrayed his Communist friends during the McCarthy years.

The younger generation in *Gentleman's Agreement* were eager to establish careers, set up comfortable homes, and raise their families free from prejudice after the uncertainties of the Second World War.

The young in *Over and Above* have replaced all the old values with an impulsive fanaticism. The characterization of Julie as a vacuous, naive spoiled brat — in explicit counterpoint to her tolerant, endlessly creative grandmother — betrays Hobson's fears for the future.

• Marcy Kahan teaches at Dawson College.

A symposium on Captain Cook's voyages boils up oceans of new facts and theories

CAPTAIN JAMES COOK
AND HIS TIMES
Edited by Robin Fisher
and Hugh Johnston
Douglas & McIntyre
278pp, $16.95

A wax effigy of Captain James Cook

Fans of the Captain Cook saga have cause for rejoicing at the appearance of this book. Each essay in selection of this papers presented at an international conference held at Simon Fraser University in 1978offers something new on the subject — and what a subject!

Before Cook's three voyages to the Pacific in the second half of the 18th century, only God knew the boundaries of the habitable earth and the navigable oceans. Cook mapped New Zealand, charted the east coast of Australia, discovered Hawaii and examined the north-west coast of North America.

"More than any other person," writes one contributor, "he helped to make the world one world."

Some of the mind-boggling implications of Cook's travels are the subjects of several brilliantly investigated essays: on the geographical perspectives he opened up, on the impact of his landing on the indians of B.C.'s Nootka Sound, and on the artistic bequest left with the Nootka Indians by the explorers.

Cook himself is one of the great historical enigmas, despite the publication in 1974 of what appeared to be the definitive biography, J.C. Beaglehole's *Life of Captain James Cook*.

A distinguished naval doctor throws new light on the riddle of Cook's violent death; nor are Cook's relations with his associates and contemporaries neglected.

As fascinating as any of the papers are the three that deal with the master mariner's reputation. While he lived, Cook enjoyed fame; posthumously he achieved heroic stature.

But was he merely, as one contributor has it, "the prototypical hero of European imperialism . . . the first and most enduring hero of European expansion in the Pacific"? Or do his life and accomplishments contain something that all men can respect and admire?

Readers of this excellent book will no doubt wish to come to their own conclusions. *— Trevor Burridge*

THE WHIRLWIND
John Creasey
Hodder & Stoughton,
192pp, $8.95

This is the 34th story in the Dr. Palfrey Series by a writer of quite incredible industry who is also responsible for the Gideon Series, the Roger West, the Toff, the Baron and the Department Z Series. They are consumed like peanuts by readers who can't get enough.

The Whirlwind is like the 33 earlier adventures; the series attempts a blend of conventional detective story and science fantasy on a sub-Hardy Boys level.

Dr. P., head of yet another secret arm of British intelligence, runs a worldwide network of benign information gatherers from his bunker located not a stone's throw from Buckingham Palace.

The problem that occupies him in the present instance is an outbreak of target-seeking twisters which threatens to lay waste the world. Harmless nonsense if you like this kind of thing, and millions do.

— Marion McCormick

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